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ABSTRACT

In arguing for an interdisciplinary higher education curriculum in the arts (IDC), this paper points out that such collaborative efforts will help students to understand more thoroughly the interrelationships and underlying unity of the arts, to articulate their training more forcefully to the general public, and to engage more actively in creative expression. The paper addresses three areas relevant to the implementation of such a curriculum: (1) the real or imagined hazards posed by an IDC program, (2) possible approaches to the design of a basic IDC curriculum, and (3) course objectives and methods of achieving those objectives. (FL)

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THEATRE AND THE INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTS CURRICULUM:

Proceed At Your Own Risk

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Theatre And The Interdisciplinary Arts Curriculum:

Proceed At Your Own Risk

Whenever and wherever an idea for an interdisciplinary arts program is mentioned, be it a curricular, departmental, college or administrative meeting, the proposer is immediately confronted with a rainbow of expressions, ranging from disbelief to outright hostility. Benign sentiments are manifested by wry grins and curious, uneasy glances which contain some hint of affirmation and support. I suspect one reason for this manic display is the ignorance we all share, given the term "interdisciplinary."

Actually, in theory and practice, the operation and application of the term is very simple. It means the bringing together of the various disciplines to view life themes and respective approaches to the various subjects which contain the themes. Note, I am limiting my discussion to the arts. The various sciences, say, might concern themselves with functions as they reflect upon resolutions to problems concerning ecosystems; a rather sterile topic, I grant you, but one, nevertheless, important to scientists and the future of mankind. In the arts, on the other hand, we are concerned with what man creates, how he creates, why he creates, and what effect that creation has on the perceiver. These concerns are not peculiar to or singular to a separate art form, but they encompass the several arts which make interdisciplinary studies not only appropriate, but sensible.

Interdisciplinary studies in the arts are not new. A case can be made that they have been with us throughout our cultural history. Indeed, Aristotle demonstrates the transdisciplinary nature of the several arts in his Poetics.

It is no accident when he mentions the six elements of drama as being: plot, thought, character, diction, music and spectacle. These are not exclusively dramatic, for one or several of them can be found in the visual, auditory, and other combined arts. An expressionistic study by Edward Munch has as much thought, character, rhythm, and spectacle as anything derived from an expressionistic script of O'Neill. I do not think I am stretching a point in attempting to substantiate what is an essential unity of the arts; nor do I beg the issue by stating the arts are especially receptive to an interdisciplinary approach.

In this paper, I would like to address three areas relevant to a proposal for an interdisciplinary arts program: (1) discuss the real or imagined hazards of an IDC program; (2) suggest possible approaches to the design of a basic curricula; and (3) give several course objectives and methods of achieving them.

Perhaps the greatest fear voiced by theatricians relative to the implimentation of an IDC arts program is the notion that theatre will somehow lose its identity as an academic entity. It is noted that those texts which do exist and which do have a cross disciplinary orientation generally exclude theatre as a subject area. This is true. Texts don't exist. I do not know that this is a potential problem. The central issue, and this is also true, is the appearance of theatre as being central to the arts. It is not a chauvinistic response. Wagner, not solely a man of the theatre, answered the question in the 19th century in proposing the idea of a "Gesamkuntswerk" or total theatre. My experience has been that theatre becomes the rallying point for intellectual and practical activity. For the modernists among us, and it is not a bad idea to pursue study of contemporary trends, musicians would be hard pressed to explain the Kiss or the Who without referring to their dramatic characters and sensational displays. Cristo's running fence certainly

has rhythm accompanying its spectacle and essential conflict.

A second objection which is often voiced is the diversion of faculty from their prime mission. Administrators and faculty maintain their function is not to produce new initiatives, but to build and give additional substance to existing programs. This is a short-sighted view, for it fails to consider two very important benefits. First, strong interdisciplinary arts courses engender student enthusiasm for all the arts, thereby strengthening them. Second, and perhaps most importantly, assignments of faculty to IDC teams serve to revitalize, renew, and retool the scholarship and intellectual breadth of individual faculty members. I know of no better way of establishing an inexpensive faculty development plan that introduces faculty to interrelated work of an intense nature which compels a broadening of interests, along with a narrowing and crystalization of subject insights.

Let me be permitted a slight diversion. I note, with interest, another panel at these meetings has as its subject - "Towards a Redefinition of Style." I submit that this question would have been taken care of had we, in theatre, only listened to the similarities proposed for some time by the art historians and musicologists. Romanticism, for example, is fanciful, quixotic, and emotionally exuberant. And, yes, its subjects include the exotic and far off.

What is the point? Having benefited from the expertise of our artist and musical colleagues, we no longer wallow in amorphous thoughts, given the terms "style" or "romanticism," but precisely articulate the subject matter and literary devices employed by the individual artists, writers and composers.

Two further objections seem to compliment each other. IDC courses lack a central focus and, as a result, students become confused at the overwhelming quantity of the materials. The arts are a rich and diverse pursuit. Their commonalities exist in the similar terminology each branch employs, as well

as in the respective temperaments of the artists as conditioned by the socio-cultural milieu in which the makers exist and work. The journey of self discovery from which art results is a personal process. The tools of the effect are the same. A dramatist employs words, a painter uses paints, and a composer writes notes, in arriving at their respective compositions. Each art is then analyzed by the perceiver by using the historical "buzz" words; structure, form, tempo, rhythm, subject and so forth. This is the beginnings of their commonality. They are covered by the umbrella of the history of the period; that is, the socio-economic factors which impact upon the artists themselves. It seems strange to me that disciplined and educated artists can not provide a centrist point of view in arriving at understanding and presentation of materials.

I have also been confronted with opposition from practicing artists whose refrain is simply - the arts are doing, not talking. I agree. Any IDC arts course should include, as part of its structure, a laboratory component. This component need only introduce basic elements common to the individual art as practiced. Of course, every effort must be made to relate activities to the interrelationships which must inevitably be discerned. Numerous examples can be drawn to vivify this point. Let me give a simple example. The concept of time is thought of as fast or slow. This is readily understood in the auditory arts (music and theatre), but it is not as recognizable in the visual arts. However, a quick reference to two paintings and the postures engaged in by the subjects of the works easily gives a time aspect to the visual arts. Toulouse-Lautrec's "At the Moulin Rouge" conveys a sense of easy conversation, languidness and a generally relaxed atmosphere. We can conclude that it embraces a "slow" tempo. On the other hand, Emil Nolde's "Dancing Around the Golden Calf" awakens a frenzied, exuberant, uncontrolled,

and quickened excitement which typifies a "fast" tempo. Certainly, these examples are specifically chosen, but the point is made, given tempo as a term in visual arts.

Let us consider one further objection. What do we do about load distribution and full time equivalencies? This is really a problem for administrators who labor under archaic state guidelines which fail to accommodate the special needs of arts study. Ideally, a lecture session for IDC courses should have 45 students. If an inter/team approach is employed (a term which I will explain later), simple division gives each faculty member 15 students for FTE accounting purposes. Fifteen students is a respectable number for faculty load distribution in the arts.

Having given you the possible objections to the adoption of an IDC course and having given responses to those challenges, let us turn our attention to the methods of approach which might be implimented in realizing such a program.

Basically, IDC Arts can be pursued from three possible vantage points. These are: multi/serial; cross/coordinator; and inter/team. I would like to discuss each of these points of view, and you will excuse my bias in favor of the inter/team style of instruction. I do think that whichever technique is chosen, numerous advantages to an arts program can be realized.

Before discussing these approaches, however, let me make one further point. The Renaissance has ended. In this age of specialization, a man of the Renaissance is an anomaly. He/she does not exist. It is for this reason that any IDC program must be staffed by persons with separate orientations in the visual arts, the auditory arts, and the combined arts.

The first technique, multi/serial, involves what I have labeled "turn teaching." In this, a lecturer arrives on a preordained day with a unit plan and works for a period of weeks, tests on his unit and leaves. The subject

matter for such instruction may encompass an historical, formal, or thematic framework. Unfortunately, the awkwardness of such an organizational pattern is readily identifiable. It means that the visual arts person speaks solely to his subject, with only passing reference, if at all, to the other disciplines.

Let us say, for example, the concept of the hero as viewed by the several arts is the subject matter for investigation. The visual arts historian may show a few slides of sculpture by Praxiteles, one or two triumphal arches, several paintings of Velasquez, Van Dyck or Rigaud, and marvels at the wonders of the Parthenon. The auditory arts oriented person is next expected to complete a unit in which selections are played from Verdi's Otello, Stravinsky's Oedipus, and perhaps Berg's Woyzeck. Appropriate commentary concerning musical structure, theme, technique, and form accompanies the musical selections played. Finally, the combined arts are represented by a theatre person who addresses heroic issues by explicating Sophocle's Oedipus Rex, Shakespeare's Othello and Henry V, and the Buchner Woyzeck.

Instruction has been accomplished centering upon a thematic concept and "x" weeks of study have been completed. To demonstrate their competencies, students are expected to synthesize the diverse concepts by responding to the following suggested questions:

1. What are the relationships between the architecture of classical Greece and Sophocle's Oedipus with regard to heroic expression?
2. How does music support the heroic image?

The burdens placed on the student who matriculates in this atmosphere are staggering.

Turn teaching implies condensation. My experience with this style involves the taking of the basic appreciation course from each of the arts and

repackaging it as an IDC course. It is frustrating to the students and the teaching staff.

A second approach to instructional organization has been labeled cross/coordinator. This involves the appointment of one team member as the coordinator. It is this individual who is truly designing and teaching the course. He/she invites other team members or resource personnel in to give guest lectures.

A typical syllabus for study of the arts during the period in which "revolts against reality" exemplified artistic endeavor might engage the following organizational pattern. The coordinator from theatre studies his discipline in relationship to concomitant art trends. The expressionism-surrealism of Strindberg is compared and/or contrasted with the impressionism of Renoir or Cezanne; the strong emotional outcries of Munch; and the visions of Dali. In music, selections from Berg, Stravinsky and Ives are listened to, as well as a sprinkling of synthesizer composers such as Stockhausen, Caburo, and Cage.

The coordinator approach works best in a cultural history course. It is, at best, a major/minor pursuit with minimal interrelationships established.

Finally, the inter/team is the most difficult to organize, supervise and implement; yet, it is the most rewarding. Its goal orientation is towards practice from which terminology and theory are derived. Inter/team requires continuous individual involvement and lectures are drawn from both elements of form and subject matter. Thus, line means something more than that which connects two points. It is seen as an element of form in the time, space, and combined arts. Each of the form elements can be discussed in this way, which allows parallels to be drawn in the several arts; thereby establishing uniqueness and characteristic relationships.

Contemporary art trends are the likely subjects for investigation, since they embody the archetypal techniques and subject matters of the past. Time travel allows for themes to be developed and cultural dynamics to be appreciated. Finally, synthesis of elements, subjects, and themes is facilitated by repetition at the practical (psycho-motor) and cognitive levels.

Let me conclude my remarks by examining possible inter/team course objectives and methods of achieving them. I would specifically comment on three objectives:

1. The student participates in artistic creation.
2. The student participates as an active perceiver of the arts and develops skills in art analysis.
3. The student demonstrates a sensitivity to the immediate environment.

My purpose in stating objectives in such a concrete way is to allow for evaluation to occur at a quantifiable level.

Participating in artistic creation is not meant to imply anything more than a simple proficiency. An interpretive body movement to a musical stimulus is a dance. The structure of dance precisely reflects several terms found in the other art forms. Dance has a variety, contrast, climax, transition, balance, sequence, repetition, and harmony. I would suggest that each of these elements are as likely to be found in a painting, sculpture, musical piece, or live play presentation. Each operates in a similar fashion in the several forms and parallel relationships can be concluded. The point is, however, that the participant has actively employed the terminology rather than drearily reading about it.

Another means of achieving the same objective is to have the student write and direct a short dialogue which has a beginning, middle, and end. Finally, joining as a member of a performing ensemble which stages, designs,

choreographs, and sings a choral selection from musical theatre can be looked at as an appropriate way to conclude this integration objective.

As a perceiver of the arts, it is sufficient to expect a student to attend art functions. He/she reports on those functions in a descriptive and reactive way to the experience. This is accomplished in both a written and verbal format. Note, the student is asked to describe the event, as well as engage in analysis. The analysis should be of a personal nature in the sense that the object or function perceived has or has not related in some way. Thus, active criticism results.

Lastly, developing a sensitivity to the immediate environment implies a desire to inculcate a heightened awareness to the surroundings. The student may be asked to select and rearrange the elements of nature to create an art object. This may be accomplished by the taking of a simple photograph, by notating and editing actual conversations, or by recording the sounds of the environment and organizing them into a sound piece. This same objective may include requesting an individual to identify and articulate a solution to an obvious incompatibility between a work of human endeavor and its environment. This may mean taking a sculpted object from being placed against a wall and placing it in a central area which permits 360° viewing; or, it may mean backing or framing paintings with different materials.

These are three possible course objectives for an interdisciplinary arts course. You will notice they are participatory oriented and, when terminology is introduced, it is as a result and direct outgrowth of the participation. The terms are defined as they relate to the experience, rather than as entities in and of themselves.

While the team approach is the choice method of instruction, some variations can occur in the first two (multi/serial and cross/coordinator)

which would make them equally attractive.

My final point is simply stated. As we move into the 80's and prepare for significant advances in arts education, we must recognize the hope of the future lies in interdisciplinary training. Through such collaborative endeavors, students will more thoroughly understand the interrelationships and underlying unity of the arts, will more forcefully articulate and represent their training to the public, and will more actively engage in creative expression.